

Legal Aid Ontario's Mental Health Strategy consultations begin with release of paper

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http://www.legalaid.on.ca/en/news/newsarchive/1312-04_mentalhealthstrategy.asp

Legal Aid Ontario (LAO) released a paper today setting out a set of first principles and key issues that LAO believes are important to developing its Mental Health Strategy.

“LAO plays a crucial role in empowering clients in the mental health system,” says John McCamus, Chair of LAO. “Our Mental Health Strategy aims to improve access for a client group that is disproportionately criminalized, incarcerated, impoverished and under-housed.”

Research shows that as many as one in three legal aid certificates are issued to a client with mental health and addiction issues. Over the last 10 years, there has been a 44 per cent increase in the number of Ontario Review Board hearings and a 25 per cent increase in the number of Consent and Capacity Board hearings. This is at the same time that fewer lawyers are willing and qualified to represent clients with mental illness.

The purpose of this consultation paper, LAO's Mental Health Strategy Discussion Paper, is to discuss how best to:

develop community-based and outreach-based services

strengthen the capacity of other service providers including community legal clinics and private lawyers

proactively support clients' legal needs through early access and holistic practice models

Camille Quenneville, CEO of the Canadian Mental Health Association, Ontario, says, “We applaud LAO for its commitment to consult widely and create a mental health strategy that will have a positive impact for the people it serves. We believe LAO's strategy can help improve access to justice for the significant portion of people with mental health issues who turn to legal aid for help.”

Barbara Hall, Chief Commissioner of the Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC), says, “Preventing discrimination against Ontarians with mental health disabilities and improving access to justice are critically important tasks. That was made clear by the OHRC's province-wide consultation on human rights, mental health and addictions. Legal Aid Ontario's Mental Health Strategy discussion paper is a big step forward in helping ensure people with mental health issues are treated fairly in our justice system.”

This paper is now available for public comment through written submissions on a dedicated section about LAO's Mental Health Strategy.

Over the next couple of months, LAO will be conducting in-person and online consultation sessions with mental health and justice experts throughout the province to ensure a broad and thorough consultation.

For questions or further information, please contact:

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